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C O N F I D E N T I A L NOUAKCHOTT 000699

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SUBJECT: GENERAL AZIZ SETS HIS SIGHTS ON FORMER PRESIDENT  
VALL

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 480

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) General Aziz, President of the High State Council (military junta), visited Rosso November 23. As expected, the trip was carefully staged theater full of praise for Aziz and his "rectification," while state-run TV Mauritania showed endless clips of enthusiastic crowds greeting him. Beyond the predictable pageantry, however, General Aziz took the opportunity to send a warning to his most powerful rival, former President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall. The moment came during a press conference, when a TV Mauritania journalist asked about the "possibility of putting Ely Ould Mohamed Vall on trial, seeing as he is one of the symbols of mismanagement." Aziz replied, "No one is above the law, and no one is safe from a judicial dossier being opened on him." Given that state-run TV Mauritania is so tightly controlled at the moment, it is almost certain that the question was planted so Aziz could deliver his warning to Vall.

¶2. (C) Like most senior Mauritanian figures, Vall has several rumored skeletons in the closet that Aziz could use against him. Some of Vall's supposed ill-gotten gains include:

-- Profits from drug smuggling: Vall supposedly profited from the illicit drug trade during his time as head of National Security (DGSN), a post he occupied for almost twenty years under President Taya. (Note: Some local press reports state that an investigation into the drug trade will be opened in the near future. This is interpreted by many to mean an investigation into Vall himself. End note.)

-- Profits from cell phone licensing deals: There are persistent rumors that Vall (and Aziz as well) profited from operating licenses that were granted to the mobile carrier Chinguitel during the democratic transition period (2005-2007).

Comment: In his more than twenty years as a high-ranking government official, it is almost certain that Vall (like many others) profited from his position. He owns a spacious villa in Nouakchott, has a large hotel under construction, and is rumored to have several other real estate holdings and business interests in the country. These assets are not commensurate with a military officer's salary. End comment.

¶3. (C) Vall has so far publicly remained silent about the August 6 coup, though he privately stated to Ambassador that he regrets the coup (see Ref A). Vall has not responded to Aziz's recent thinly-veiled threat to open judicial

proceedings against him either. Since returning to Nouakchott in late August, Vall has maintained a very low profile, seeming to adopt a "wait and see" approach. Vall has also requested to be discharged from the military, but the HSC has held up his requests to be released. Comment: If future presidential elections exclude members of the military from standing as candidates, keeping Vall in the military could be another arrow in Aziz's quiver to keep him at bay. End comment.

¶4. (C) Comment: It is widely assumed that before the coup, Vall was positioning himself for a presidential run in 2012 when President Abdallahi's term expired. Those plans now lay in tatters after Aziz's seizure of power. There are two schools of thought regarding Vall. The first school views Vall as the puppet master -- he enabled Abdallahi to become president, and entrusted Aziz to keep an eye on things until he could run for president himself in 2012. The second school views Vall as a genuinely decent man who voluntarily surrendered power to Abdallahi, and brokered the separation of powers that Aziz and Abdallahi were supposed to have followed. In either case, Vall's business interests are now threatened, his legacy is severely tarnished, and his chances of becoming president are looking slim.

¶5. (C) Aziz, meanwhile, clearly seems to be positioning himself for a presidential bid, and using the judiciary and the specter of corruption charges to marginalize and scare off possible rivals. With President Abdallahi under house arrest, and opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah politically weakened (some would even say irrelevant), Vall is the last remaining figure who could realistically stand up to Aziz. By targeting Vall, Aziz continues to consolidate his own position and stack the deck in his favor for any future presidential elections. End comment.

¶6. (C) Advisors close to President Abdallahi see Col. Vall as the not-so-invisible hand behind the "NiNi" movement. This line of argument starts with the idea that Vall had wanted to stay on after the 2005 coup but saw too much international opposition. Abdallahi was picked as someone sufficiently malleable (with his wife of Vall and Aziz' tribe to mind him) while Aziz would take care of Vall's interests in the palace. Abdallahi upset the formula by "thinking he was really the President" while Aziz got too comfortable with power -- crossing Vall. The "neither Abdallahi nor Aziz" call serves Vall well as someone who can get the money together for a quick election (Abdallahi advisors allege that Vall's election campaign material is already sitting in containers at the port). In a fast election following a NiNi scenario, the only national-level opponents who could face off against Vall are Ould Daddah (weakened by repeated flip-flops), Zeidane (weakened by his tenure as Prime Minister) and Ould Boulkheir (not a White Moor and with limited financial resources).

HANKINS